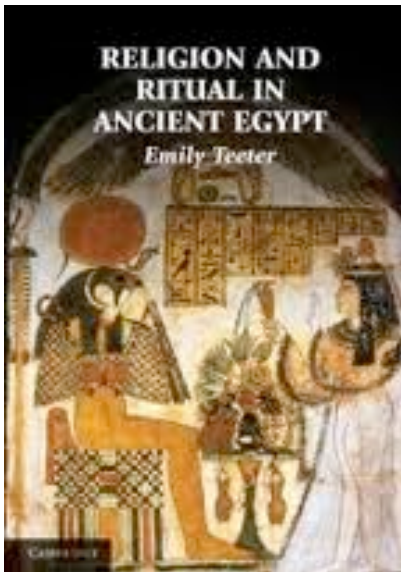




Teeter, Emily

Religion and Ritual in Ancient Egypt

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In *Religion and Ritual in Ancient Egypt*, Emily Teeter presents her readers with a very helpful offering on Egyptian religion. Rather than examining abstract or esoteric principles, Teeter's book aims to address lived religion, "how ancient Egyptians related to and worshipped their gods, and how religion affected their daily lives" (3). In it she ably familiarizes the reader with the fundamental elements of Egyptian religion, including the priests, temples, festivals, divine-human communication, magic, and the afterlife.

After a brief introduction, chapter 1 (3–15) examines the Egyptian mind, providing a theoretical framework for the subsequent chapters addressing the more concrete aspects of religion. Teeter argues that religion permeated and undergirded Egyptian society, and she notes that, although foreign to the modern mind, Egyptian religion was imminently practical and based on observation of the environment. For example, rather than concocting a complex theoretical treatise on life after death or on the nature of the sky and the sun, Egyptians simply envisioned the afterlife as a mirror of present life and concluded that the "sun crossed the sky in a boat because people in the Nile Valley travelled by boat" (9) (similarly, it is interesting to note that the divine presence was often transported in the same manner as the people, on a boat-shaped bark in Egypt, appropriate for river travel, and by an ark in the Hebrew Bible, appropriate for overland travel). Over time, "alternate expressions for physical phenomena [such as the sun] were

developed” (10). These alternatives were understood to be equally valid truth claims, complementary rather than contradictory. In addition, rather than simply being a visual reproduction of the original, the representation of a person or object in an image such as a statue served as a “counterimage” with the potential to be a person’s “eternal double and surrogate” (4), such that an image could extend a person’s presence both spatially and temporally.

Chapter 2 (16–38) turns to the religious professionals, the priests. Teeter notes that the major temples employed an enormous number of priests, who, rather than being strictly segregated, were fully integrated into Egyptian society. In fact, most served on a part-time basis. After a general introduction to the priesthood, Teeter addresses the various types of priests and priestesses. Purity seems to be the defining characteristic of the priesthood, achieved primarily through regular washing and diet. In return for their service, priests were paid with the leftovers of the offerings they presented to the deities and statues of prominent individuals.

Having examined the religious personnel, Teeter addresses their primary workplace in chapter 3 (39–55), the temples that served as “the dramatic settings for the performance of rituals essential for the maintenance of the cosmos and that formed the main dialogue between the realms of humans and god” (39). A discussion of statues follows that addresses the scant evidence for remaining cult statues, the nature of the cult statue, and the perceived permanence of divine presence in the statue. Teeter contends that Egyptians understood statues as simply “statues (*bes* or *sekhem*), rather than the actual god (*netcher*)” (43). She then turns to the primary ritual in the temples, the thrice-daily offering service, which provided the care and feeding of the deity in the form of its statue (although one should note that, although likely presented together, the daily care and feeding of the gods are usually attested separately [see, e.g., Harold Hays, “The Ritual Scenes in the Chapel of Amun,” in *The Epigraphic Survey, Medinet Habu IX: The Eighteenth Dynasty Temple Part I: The Sanctuary* (OIP 136; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), esp. 2–3, 7–8]. Since most scholars fail to make the distinction, it is difficult for the nonspecialist to track down the appropriate texts). The temple ritual was not esoteric, and “the general population had a good sense of what went on within the temples” (52). Given the massive quantities of goods and the infrastructure necessary to manage them, the temple service affected a “huge percentage of the population” (52). The chapter concludes with a brief look at why so few cult statues have been preserved.

Chapter 4 (56–75) examines the festivals where the temple focus shifted outward to the larger populace. Teeter contends that, in addition to allowing greater popular participation, festivals bolstered state control, promoted royal ideology, and demonstrated the interconnectedness of the funerary and nonfunerary realms. The chapter then addresses

more specifically the festivals of Osiris, the Feast of the Valley, and the festival of Amunhotep I.

Chapter 5 (76–103) provides an especially helpful survey of the various means used by the populace to contact the gods outside of the temple sanctuaries. Various areas on the outskirts of temples such as the temple doorways and chapels often located on the exterior back walls of temples were associated with prayer and the presentation of offerings. In homes and other domestic locales, stelae have been found (many the size of a mobile phone) engraved with images of ears that were thought to transmit messages to the deity. Large quantities of offerings (votives) presented in thanks for or anticipation of divine aid have also been found in various locales. In addition, individuals could place statues of themselves in the temples, which as surrogates provided them with eternal access to the temple proceedings. Such a statue could transmit prayers and the sanctity of rituals to its owners, receive offerings itself, act as an intermediary interceding on an individual's behalf before the gods in exchange for a small service, and perpetuate the name of the donor. Dreams and trances allowed an individual access to the realm of the gods and the dead and thereby enabled divine-human contact.

Chapter 6 (104–18) addresses divine communication with humanity, whether solicited or unsolicited. Oracles consulted during processions and festivals afforded the public a means of receiving legally binding divine decisions and served as the “perfect social mechanism for maintaining community peace through public consensus, presented as the word of god” (109; cf. prophecy, which could result in contradictory oracles in the name of the same deity). Teeter contends that uncontrolled contact with the divine was usually understood to be a bad omen, manifested most often through misfortune, which was interpreted as divine censure. In order to protect themselves against such divine punishment, people commonly sought protection, especially in the form of amulets.

Chapter 7 (119–147) turns to death and funerary rites. As the afterlife was considered much like life, an individual needed to be similarly well-provisioned. Thus a significant amount of time and expenditure by an individual and upon death by his family was devoted to this provisioning. In turn, death was big business, and the economy of death touched the lives of the majority of people. Although offerings were solicited and provisioned for, Egyptians also sought other means of receiving sustenance in death. For example, images of food on the tomb walls “through the principle of substitution” were “thought to be able to serve as actual food” (130), and the mere verbalization of foodstuffs caused them to become available to the deceased, while statues (*shabtis*) performed agricultural labor for the deceased. In addition to outfitting the tomb, which often consisted of a subterranean burial chamber and an above-ground offering chapel,

funerary rites were also necessary, which included the Opening of the Mouth ceremony designed to “restore the deceased’s ability to see, speak, hear, and taste” (139).

Chapter 8 (148–60) examines communication with the dead and illustrates the permeable boundaries between the two realms. Often represented by stelae, the *akh*, “an aspect of a person’s energy and personality manifested after death” (148–49), was the primary communication partner. These *akhs* were expected to intercede on the individual’s behalf before the deity and could wreak havoc if neglected. Letters to the dead and dreams were especially prominent means of communication.

Chapter 9 (161–81) addresses magic, understood as “just another means humans could communicate with deities to seek protection from illness and from enemies” (163). In order to be effective, magicians had to be able to read or at least know the contents of spells. Although there is some evidence for destructive spells, most seem to have been defensive, used either for protection or to bring healing.

Chapter 10 (182–96) attends to the anomalous Amarna period, focusing on its practical effect on the populace. While traditional Egyptian religion afforded direct access to the divine, Amarna religion posited the king as the sole intermediary between human and divine (consequently, many of the priestly roles and titles disappeared). While traditional religion rewarded piety and good deeds in this life and the next, Amarna religion rewarded loyalty to the king. Teeter’s book concludes with a helpful and interesting appraisal of Egyptian religion, especially addressing reasons for its longevity.

Religion and ritual in Ancient Egypt covers a tremendous amount of ground in terms of the size and diversity of material as well as the three-millennia-long time period under investigation. Teeter’s presentation is consistently clear, even-handed, and well-written. Its practical approach, focusing on lived religion and its effects, is especially suited to Egyptian religion, which is thoroughly pragmatic. Although some of the ground she covers is well-trodden, her analyses are often insightful. The book’s primary contribution, at least for the nonspecialist audience, lies in its accumulation and synthesis of so much material in one place in a competent and accessible way that will serve students well and provide valuable fodder for further study and comparative work.

However, given the ambitious scope of Teeter’s work and the limited space allotted to it, the reader at times may wish for more detail and precision. Although there is some attention to diachronic changes, Teeter’s study is primarily synchronic, such that it is difficult to trace the development of Egyptian religion or gauge how prominent the practices she presents were across time and according to place. Likewise, Teeter occasionally sacrifices nuance for the sake of clarity. For example, her contention that a

statue is simply a statue requires further qualification. The Memphite Theology, for instance, refers to statues as gods' "bodies" and even asserts that the gods "become" (*hpr*) their bodies: by entering their cult statues, the gods in some way "become" those statues. She also seems to simply equate the *ka* with the physical form. In other cases Teeter makes some general statements that require further elaboration to be convincing. For example, she claims that unsolicited divine contact was usually interpreted as a bad omen. However, this does not take sufficient account of dreams, which could be positive or negative, and positive signs such as prosperity, which were interpreted as a sign of divine favor (given the human penchant for focusing on problems, these naturally feature less prominently in the surviving record). Likewise, magic may be understood as more than a means of communicating with deities. It may in certain circumstances serve as a means of co-opting divine power (*hk3*) without having to communicate with deities or to enlist their participation. However, such limitations are inevitable in a book of this size. Overall, Teeter's work is to be highly recommended both for the classroom and for the scholar of biblical and comparative literature.